"Well, he's not in his quarters, sir, and I'm getting his readings--or I was--near the shuttle-bay. I thought after last night it might not be the safest place to take a stroll."

"No it isn't."

"Should I page him, sir?"

"No, Scotty. I'll head down there. I'm armed and I'll be careful. He's probably looking for a quiet place to meditate. Kirk out." He cursed himself for catering to the Vulcan's reserve to the extent of becoming an errand boy, but he couldn't simply order him back to his quarters. What was he doing down there? Courting disaster? Offering himself as bait? Even fully lit, the shuttle bay was dim in comparison to the rest of the ship. The height of the ceiling, the experience of so much space in comparison to the eight-foot ceilings throughout the living quarters gave it a cathedral quiet. Until they could replace the lost shuttle, there was only one remaining. The door was open, and the automatic lighting from the interior spilled out on the empty deck.

"Spock?" There was no answer from inside, and he unholstered his phaser and eased inside. The Vulcan sat at the control panel, his back to Kirk. He did not turn around. "Spock? I've been looking for you. Where you meditating?"

"After a fashion." His voice was only a whisper, and he still didn't turn. Stepping closer, Kirk could see the tension in the lean figure, could see sweat stains under Spock's arms, running down the midline of his back, beading on the back of his neck. Spock sweating?

"What's the matter? Are you sick? Do you want McCoy?"

"He cannot help me."

"But--" Kirk reached for the co-pilot's chair, and Spock's arm shot out like a steel rod, barring him from it.

"HE CANNOT HELP ME!" Spock's hand closed on the back of the chair and its impact plastic crumbled under his grip. He turned and his eyes were flame.

Every reflex screamed at Kirk to run. He had seen that look before, on the sands of Vulcan, directed at him with the same demonic intent, but the hand that crushed the chair was still healing from danger he'd sent the Vulcan into, and Spock was fighting for control.

"Forgive me, Captain. Please do not come--too close."

"But you need help," Kirk said uncertainly.

"There is no help. It has only--come sooner--than I expected."

Kirk wondered how long the Vulcan had been in such a state of arousal, hiding the fever and agonizing tension under that Vulcan control, trying to heal himself, and cope with this on top of his own problems--the Romulan, T'serek. Had the boy's obvious infatuation brought this on?

"Did T'serek cause this?"

"No!" There was such repudication in the negative that Kirk automatically said, "I didn't mean to insult you--"

"I--was not insulted, Captain. T'serek's desire is not responsible. I think it is...good to be desired. It was not him."

"S'Tyge?" Kirk was talking in whispers, too, because at least Spock was talking, and Kirk could not endure the lonliness in the figure less than a yard away.

"No."

"Then who, Spock?" Compassionate concern weighted Kirk's voice, urging,"Can't someone help you?

His own body ached in sympathy for the effort it took the Vulcan to raise his head. The face was stone. The burning eyes met his and did not fall away.

Kirk felt the kick of his heart, felt dizzied, wordless.

Spock's voice was shaking, yet he went on, as if forced. "I saw--how you were drawn to him--I desired--" The hoarse whisper was almost suspended, "The fault is mine."

Grief almost choked Kirk, misunderstandings, fear, his own incredible blindness. Memory showed him T'serek, saying 'Before I let my body shame me, I would burn it in the fire' and Spock was burning now.

"He's beautiful," Kirk acknowledged. His body had responded to T'serek, but his whole being surged now toward Spock, body only a part of it, but Spock's body was in dire need. "But do you really think, if you wanted me, that anyone else could mean more?" His own voice shook, and he was afraid that Spock hadn't heard, wouldn't believe. He reached out and the Vulcan flinched back, escaped from the chair, retreated as far as he could in the closed space. He stood pressed against the wall in near panic.

"Captain, you misunderstand. It was--my--madness--which made me think-- Our needs are not the same. I have no right. I cannot control--"

Madness. Burning. Danger. Kirk felt it, the threat, the peril, like standing on the edge of a solar volcano.

"You don't have to." Compassion, commitment deepened Kirk's voice. "Not with me. Take what you need." He reached for the tense shoulders with unsteady hands, and Spock flattened further against the wall. "Anything, Spock. If it's life, you've given me life a dozen times over. Take what you need."

Spock's head rocked back against the wall. "I can't!" Tears forced their way between his closed lids. Kirk felt his own eyes sting.

"Hush." He gathered the racked body close, in an encompassing hug, accepting the tears, the snubbed pressure of Spock's straining sex close to his own. It didn't matter. It was part of Spock. Spock hurt. How could anyone see and not want to ease that need, relieve that burning body? Still no yielding. Had no one ever gentled him? "Don't you want me?" he whispered. A shudder, faint negative of the sleek, damp head, pathetic effort to withdraw. Kirk hugged harder, slid his hands under Spock's sweat-soaked shirt. Shot in the dark. Someone had to take it. "I think that means yes, Spock. You'll have to stop me if I'm wrong."

No softness anywhere. Fever. Skin like satin over marble. Spasmodic trembling. Kirk unfastened the waistband of Spock's pants, slid his hands down and back, rubbing, kneading, urging the tense hips forward, slowly rubbing his own pelvis against Spock's.